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Making of Illinois

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H. J. Eckenrode

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VIRGINIA IN THE MAKING OF ILLINOIS.

(By H. J. Eckenrode.)

It is my privilege to bear the fraternal greetings of the Virginia Historical Society to this assembly on the happy and auspicious occasion of the celebration of the one-hundredth anniversary of the Statehood of Illinois. It is also my honor and pleasure this evening to speak of the part played by Virginia in the origin and development of Illinois.

Illinois has been often called, and with reason, the foremost commonwealth of the Union; and, as we see it to-day it is great, prosperous, rich in material wealth and rich in human happiness. It is a type of modern civilization, offering all that seems best in twentieth-century life. But it is not of the present Illinois, in which it has been your fortunate lot to be born, that I am here to speak, but of that Illinois of long ago, the Illinois of forests and uninhabited prairies, of Indians and wild beasts—the embryo Illinois, still unshaped by fate, as it waited to be born. The task is mine to outline those prenatal forces which determined what Illinois should be, when, in the fulness of time, it became a community of civilized men.

Happily there is no tendency to-day to begrudge the South the credit due it for its share in the making of America. After the long estrangement all parts of the United States are now joined in a fraternal love and fellowship which augurs well for the future of the nation. One of your finest Middle West statesmen—one of the finest Americans of the present generation, in my opinion—ex-Senator Beveridge of Indiana, in his great work on John Marshall, has generously acknowledged the important contribution of Virginia to the development of America. In the publications of the Illinois Historical Society, which are a model of scholarship and of the book-maker's art as well, the great work done by Virginia in the West is set forth at length. Indeed, in recent years there has been a growing tendency all through the North and West to appreciate at its full worth the part of the South in the moulding of the American nation, and a realization that without the South the national life would be the poorer.

The discovery of America was one of those events which should help to confirm our faith in providence, even in spite of the fearful turmoil of the present. The discovery was not only a matter of supreme good fortune to mankind, but the time of discovery as well. It came at the end of the Middle Ages, in a period of great change and rapid development, when the influence of such an unprecedented happening produced its maximum effect. If the Norse had colonized America centuries before Columbus, there would have been only another feudal Europe on our shores; if the discovery of America had been delayed until Europe had come into full contact with India and the East and had completed the growth of the new civilization which came into being at

the close of the feudal era, America would not have so greatly influenced the life of humanity. But the discovery, by enlarging man's physical world by vast, uninhabited regions at the very moment when his spiritual and intellectual vision was enlarging, proved decisive of the future of the race.

At the end of the Middle Ages, European man had passed through the centuries of disorder and anarchy following the destruction of antique civilization and was busily engaged in evolving a life which embodied the germ of representative government and the other great, distinctive modern ideas. Much had been learned in the Middle Ages, but man had suffered very grievously in the course of his hard schooling. Political and social caste had become more deeply imbedded in man's consciousness than at any other time in human existence, and democracy was as yet almost unthought of. Sir Thomas More's *Utopia,* written at this time, seemed a hopeless dream of justice and equality. Class distinctions were embodied in law, and the chance for the poor man, the obscure man, in England as in all European countries, was exceedingly small. There was then, at the time of the discovery of America, a young and plastic civilization, full of promise but threatened with destruction by the growing economic pressure due to an increasing population. Some way of emancipation was needed and the New World supplied the need.

When the English settled America—Virginia first in 1607, and Massachusetts a few years later—they brought with them the ideas, traditions and prejudices of medieval Europe, along with the priceless inheritance of English liberty and English institutions. The contemporary accounts of American life in the first century of colonization do not make cheerful reading. De Foe, for instance, paints a dreary picture of Virginia, and there is no hint in his description of the splendid civilization maturing beneath the surface. In New England, too, there was a long age of religious bigotry and narrow living—of smallness and dulness—before the New England spirit gained its great historic growth.

But gradually, in the vast areas of America, in the immense stretches of pine and oak forest, offering breathing-space and working-space and happiness-space to the immigrants from crowded Europe, a spiritual revolution was wrought. Every individual was offered a chance to become a free man—that is to make a decent living for himself and for his family without a master over him. The pine forests have proved good for the health of the ailing body; they were also good for the ailing spirit. European man came sick to the American shores and in the wild, untenanted woods his soul found healing. He began to lose his age-long class consciousness and to stand erect and free.

The English in Virginia, favored by a good soil and kindly climate, built up one of the two civilizations which were destined to grow into the United States. The other was developing, at the same time and quite independently, in New England.

The community founded by the tobacco planters in Virginia was one of the most notable and influential in modern history, by reason of its singular charm and its solid merit as well. It was a life of great freedom and eminent sanity that the planters lived on the beautiful rivers of old

Virginia. The spell of that life, so admirably described by our ambassador to Italy, Thomas Nelson Page, has been cast over the whole South and West. Surely the gracious tradition of Middle West hospitality is Virginian in origin, and from the same source comes the Middle West joy of living.

The fine tradition of English constitutional liberty flowered in the Virginia House of Burgesses, which, by the middle of the eighteenth century, had become in many ways the foremost legislative body in the world. The modern committee system was first perfected in the House of Burgesses, before the House of Commons in England and before our own Congress. In almost every way the House of Burgesses was a model of parliamentary procedure and enlightened legislation. It was this House of Burgesses which first perceived and resisted the sinister tendencies of the British government as these became manifest at various times in the eighteenth century. It maintained clearly and effectively the principle of constitutional government.

In Virginia, in that wonderful period between the close of the French and Indian War and the close of the Revolution, American democracy grew to fruition. The Virginia planters, far freer and far more generous in outlook than their brethren, the English landed proprietors, willingly adopted the ideals of democracy and gave them practical realization in the government of the commonwealth.

It was the great democrat Patrick Henry, whose name should be forever dear to the lovers of liberty, that first openly defied the British government and began the Revolution. It was the equally great George Mason, who, in the Virginia Bill of Rights, laid down, once for all, the principles of free government, and who, in the Virginia constitution of 1776, gave the world the first written constitution. And there, too, was Thomas Jefferson, the greatest of them all, who wrote the Declaration of Independence and changed the ideal of national democracy from the dream-stuff of generous thinkers into that governmental system to which our allegiance and our lives are pledged.

Virginia and New England together lighted the fires of the Revolution and brought the American nation into being in that ever-happy year of 1776. But the outcome of the war with the greatest military power of the age was doubtful; and even if independence were achieved, it seemed likely that the United States would be bounded on the west by the Alleghany Mountains. There were then no American settlers in the vast region between the Ohio River and the Great Lakes. A few Frenchmen were the only white inhabitants of this region, which was held by the British garrisons at various points. If the year 1783 had found those garrisons still in possession, of the Illinois country, the ground we stand on would be English soil and not American. The whole history of the United States would have been different, its promise would have been frustrated. The United States to-day would be a second-rate power instead of the greatest and strongest nation on the globe.

The fact is held in grateful remembrance by all Americans that a Virginian preserved our country from a thwarted destiny and gave to

the republic the incomparable gift of the Middle West. Not equally well known is the share of the Virginia government in bringing about the fortunate consummation.

George Rogers Clark was one of those immortal men who see through the darkness of the present to the may-be of the future, and so save the world from the might-have-beens. Amidst all the distraction of the Revolutionary War as it raged in the East, Clark preserved a wise detachment. He realized the possibilities of the great forest-covered, Indian-haunted West. The West fascinated him and he turned from the opportunity of honorable service in the Continental Army to the greater service of claiming the West for America. He dreamed of leading an army past the Alleghanies and driving the British from the land.

He could do nothing, however, without some governmental sanction and aid. And where was this aid to be obtained? The harassed Continental Congress, at its wit's end to keep the Eastern army supplied and equipped, had no thought or resources to devote to so remote an adventure as the conquest of the West. Clark's one chance lay in the favorable action of the Virginia government, and consequently he went to Williamsburg and laid his case before the authorities.

Most fortunately for America and the world, Patrick Henry happened to be governor of Virginia at the time, and he was the farthest-sighted statesman of his age. When the young Clark pleaded with him for his great idea, Henry listened with sympathy. He then called in consultation Thomas Jefferson, George Mason and George Wythe, and the decision was made to send out the expedition destined to conquer the West—surely one of the most fateful decisions ever made.

It required courage on Henry's part to think of making efforts in a new field at such a time. My researches in the Virginia Department of Archives, which in recent years has become a center of historical study, taught me that Virginia's share in the support of the American Revolution has been greatly underestimated. The records show that through all the early years of the struggle, when the North was the scene of invasion and therefore weakened in resources, immense quantities of beef and flour and thousands of guns went up Chesapeake Bay to Washington's Army. Indeed, it is hardly too much to say that that army could not have kept the field but for the aid given by the Southern commonwealth.

Although the burden of the Revolution thus rested so largely on Virginia, and every dollar was badly needed for the prosecution of the war in the East, Patrick Henry was sufficiently large-minded to see the vital importance of the West and to make a special effort to claim it. The means available were small and could not have been otherwise than small at such a moment. The obstacles were almost insuperable. Circumstances and men alike seemed to conspire against the undertaking; and if it had not been for the unyielding will and unfailing enthusiasm of George Rogers Clark, the expedition would never have set out at all.

But at last, in that history-making summer of 1778, Clark sailed down the Ohio to claim for America a land richer than all the El Dorados of the imagination. He had something less than two hundred

men, and the little company trusted itself to the waters on rough wooden scows which were without other motive power than hand-poles. And yet his small expedition, armed only with rifles and poorly supplied with food and ammunition and everything else needed in campaigning, performed one of the most notable military achievements in the annals of war.

That little band, drifting down the Ohio to the West through the interminable forest, carried with it the destiny of America. It carried with it all that Virginia had inherited from England and all that she had herself originated or developed—it carried the English law as applied in America, the idea of constitutional liberty, the fine qualities of planter culture, the democracy which had grown up under Henry and Jefferson and Mason—a rich seed for the fertile soil of the Middle West.

How the valiant handful came to Illinois and conquered is an old story—through their matchless hardihood and their bravery they added the West to the United States. When Clark raised the American standard over the Illinois forts, the crisis had passed in the fate of the nation; it then became a question only of time before the United States should expand to the Pacific. All our great advance towards the setting sun was the logical outcome of the American conquest of Illinois.

It is a fact most gratifying to a Virginian and flattering to his pride that the first organization of Illinois as American soil was accomplished under the government of Virginia. In the fall of 1778, the assembly constituted the new region the county of Illinois in the Commonwealth of Virginia. After the old Virginia fashion, a county lieutenant, John Todd, jr., was sent out to organize the county and govern it. Thus a Virginian county lieutenant was the first civil ruler of Illinois under the American flag. Todd appointed judges and effected such an organization as was possible in a territory of vast distances and few and alien inhabitants. In his letter of instructions to county lieutenant Todd, Governor Henry struck the note of true Americanism as by some prophetic instinct: "You are on all occasions to inculcate in the people of the region the value of liberty and the difference between the state of free citizens of this commonwealth and that slavery to which Illinois was destined." Settlers from Virginia soon followed the soldiers, and the first permanent element in the life of Illinois was thus almost exclusively Virginian.

The rest of the story is familiar to you—how Virginia generously resigned the territory which her arms had won to the government of the United States. In the due course of time—now just a century ago—Illinois began her great career as a sovereign State. The Virginian element in Illinois has been an honorable one, and many of the foremost citizens of the commonwealth trace their origin to the Old Dominion.

It will be seen that Virginia's share in the making of Illinois was a most important contribution. So, too, was that of New England. The New England settlers, who came by thousands in the early years of the nineteenth century, completed the work which it was Virginia's lot to inaugurate. Virginia did all in her power to fashion Illinois into an American commonwealth. New England sent her finest blood, her keenest brains, to assist in the building of the great State of the Middle

West. Here the two main civilizations have blended to produce the typical American commonwealth and the typical American spirit. The rich Illinois lands drew not only Virginian and New Englander, but Pennsylvanians and New Yorkers as well, and men from all the Eastern States and from beyond the seas. Here all currents of our life met to build up in the Middle West the first distinctively and originally American communities.

In the Middle West the process of nation-making was completed. That process had had its origin in Great Britain and in Holland; and in the Atlantic States the ideal of free government, the germs of which had been borne across the ocean, had grown to flower. On the Atlantic slope modern democracy had its birth and the modern attitude towards life came into existence.

But neither Virginia nor New England represented the last stage in the long development. About both there lingered much of European custom and prejudice; both of them at times looked backwards towards the European shore. Both were too self-contained, too marked with local characteristics to produce the final type in American civilization. That was the work of the Middle West.

The very names of the East are reminiscent of Europe—Virginia, Carolina, Maryland, New York, New England. They reflect the European colonization of the Atlantic slope. But the beautiful name of Illinois is novel and unmistakable; it belongs to America and to America alone. It breathes the thought of a new world born in the free forests and the unfenced prairies of the West.

In 1812, the London Times, in commenting on the victory of the Constitution over the Guerriere, spoke thus of the Americans: "They are of us, and an improvement on us." In the same way the East may say of Illinois: "It is of the East and an improvement on the East." In Illinois an American community came into existence which had no direct contact with European life—which was wholly American and growing to maturity in the age of the expansion of the American spirit. In the Middle West the last feudal scars on the soul of European man were smoothed away and mankind entered into the full enjoyment of modern life, with its broad democracy, its free opportunity and its hope of happiness.

It was the part of Illinois and the Middle West to give the world a fresh and rich civilization, which, it may be believed, will in the end transform the world. This civilization is democratic but it is also more than that. It is not the Athenian democracy of small things. It is a civilization which has vastly enlarged the prospect of man's material welfare. Here in the Middle West agriculture first became epic; on the broad prairies modern farming-machinery was first used with effect, and the world's food supply was increased ten-fold. It is this largeness of life which the Middle West has added to the making of America. The Middle West is not a land of pettiness and smallness, of inertia and hesitation. It is a country of broad-minded men and women—of people who go forward, who are not afraid of the untried, who look towards better things in the future because the present is so rich and full.

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We meet here in a solemn hour. The historic civilizations of Europe are dying. Science, art, literature, industry are perishing in the blood-flamed horror of the Great War. It is the fate of America to be the decisive factor in the struggle, to turn the even scales. When the titanic struggle for human right shall have ended, the United States will be the greatest, richest and most civilized country on earth. It will reach in a stride that manifest destiny which the forces of life marked out for the land more than a century ago, when the Middle West became American soil. How precious American civilization will be in the wreck of nations and the downfall of races, we can hardly appreciate as yet. But we do know even now that America, as great in her generosity as she is terrible in her wrath, will be the hope of the world and that the stars of Old Glory will shine more brightly than ever in the darkness of humanity's night.

The place of Illinois in the history of the century just past is a great and honorable one. Her share in the achievement of the coming century will be even larger. Illinois has always stood four-square for patriotism, freedom and the right to live and grow—for all the higher things of life. As never before the nation needs the virile democracy, the largeness of outlook, the open-mindedness of Illinois; and because of this need the hundredth anniversary of the birth of the great commonwealth is a time of congratulation and a harbinger of good things yet to come.

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